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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000219

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SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR ELECTION UPDATE: MARCH 12

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: This is the final update regarding the presidential elections scheduled for March 15. This report includes an Attorney General investigation of the (left-wing) Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) presidential candidate, the FMLN and the (center-right, pro-U.S.) Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) electoral campaign closing ceremonies, FMLN concerns about the potential for electoral fraud, the final Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) technical test, opinions from the private sector on the elections, the international election observation effort, and increased Election Day security measures. Embassy still considers the race too close to call. End Summary.

ATTORNEY GENERAL INVESTIGATES FUNES

¶2. (U) On March 9, (center-right) news daily La Prensa Grafica reported that Attorney General Felix Garrid Safie is investigating FMLN presidential candidate Mauricio Funes. According to Safie, Funes' bank account reported a balance of over USD two million, despite an earlier bank statement, which specified he made approximately five thousand dollars per month.

¶3. (U) Funes said March 10 in a television interview that he was aware of the Attorney General's investigation. He revealed in a newspaper advertisement that local business mogul Nicolas Salume, owner of several food franchises, has financed part of his political campaign, and that the contributor deposits the money directly into his bank account. (Note: El Salvador has no laws regulating campaign financing. End Note.) TCS TV network (conservative) also did a story on Funes' new luxury home, which Funes said was also provided by Salume.

¶4. (U) Funes denied financial wrongdoing, and said that the bulk of his account balance reflects personal loans from Salume. Funes stated in a press conference that he has not received money from Venezuelan-financed Alba Petroleos or Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. He added that he approves of the Attorney General's investigation, but resents that it was made public during the last week of the presidential campaign.

¶5. (C) In a March 9 meeting with Poloffs, FMLN Deputy Hugo Martinez criticized the Attorney General's decision to investigate Funes' accounts. Martinez called the investigation a political maneuver, and said it would not uncover any damaging information because Funes' financing has come from Mexico and the United States, not Venezuela.

POLITICAL PARTIES CLOSE CAMPAIGN WITH LARGE RALLIES

¶ 16. (SBU) Both ARENA and the FMLN held huge campaign rallies in San Salvador on March 7-8, the last weekend before the political campaigns closed on March 11. Media reports of attendance figures varied, with politicians from both parties claiming higher turnout, but the rallies highlighted the ability of both political parties to mobilize large numbers of supporters from around the country. Both parties did their best to emphasize the presence of members or leaders of the smaller parties at their events as a sign of widespread support. The FMLN's event received considerably less coverage in Salvadoran newspapers than ARENA's rally.

¶ 17. (U) The FMLN held its rally on Saturday afternoon along Avenida Juan Pablo II, filling the street with its supporters. FMLN General Coordinator Medardo Gonzalez, former National Conciliation Party (PCN) presidential candidate Tomas Chevez, and Funes' running mate, Salvador Sanchez Ceren, were keynote speakers at the rally. Funes focused his remarks on two major themes: the demand for change after 20 years of ARENA's failure to resolve security and economic problems, and the need to defend the vote from fraud perpetuated by ARENA. He alleged that ARENA was making false Unique Identification Documents (DUIs), has bused in Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans to vote, and that some ARENA employers had ordered their employees to take pictures of their vote for ARENA with cell phone cameras.

¶ 18. (SBU) ARENA started its rally on Sunday morning, packing El Salvador's largest soccer stadium. The rally featured speeches from the leaders of the (center-left) Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), the (center-right) Christian Democratic Party (PDC), and the (right-wing) National Conciliation Party (PCN), along with influential PDC mayor Wilfredo Salgado, and Avila's running mate, Arturo Zablah. "Saving El Salvador from communism" (including references to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez) was a major theme in many of the speeches. Avila discussed ARENA's contributions following El Salvador's civil war, but acknowledged that poverty and other problems still need to be resolved. He promised to work to build new housing and provide other assistance to the poorest citizens.

MARTINEZ CONFIDENT BUT CONCERNED ABOUT FRAUD

¶ 19. (C) In a March 9 meeting with Poloffs, FMLN Deputy Hugo Martinez said he was confident about the FMLN's chances for winning the March 15 election, but expressed concerns about the potential for fraud by ARENA. Martinez described the FMLN's closing campaign rally on March 7 as impressive, and said that an internal party poll showed that the FMLN would win by a slight margin, even if 60 percent of the undecided vote moved to ARENA.

¶ 110. (C) Martinez expressed concern, however, that while a margin of 5 percent or more would require blatant fraud to overcome, a smaller margin could allow ARENA to steal the election. He acknowledged the importance of electoral observers, and said that the FMLN would field observers at all electoral tables. Martinez predicted that current Salvadoran President Elias Antonio (Tony) Saca would probably violate the prohibition on campaigning in the days immediately preceding the election by giving interviews.

¶ 111. (C) Martinez denied reports in the news daily El Mundo, which said the party had plans to sanction FMLN Deputy Salvador Arias (who Martinez said was recovering from an eye surgery) for not campaigning for Funes. He did acknowledge, however, that soon after the elections, the FMLN would reposition its leadership. Martinez said that party members would directly vote on new party leadership toward the end of 2009.

INTERNAL ARENA POLLING OPTIMISTIC

¶12. (C) Elias Bahia, First Designate to the Presidency, told Charge and A/DCM on March 11 that ARENA's internal polling had Avila up by three points. He was confident Avila could win, based on an assumption that the lion's share of undecideds would vote for Avila.

CAMPAIGNS VS. THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

¶13. (U) On March 11, La Prensa Grafica reported that Federico Colorado, President of the Salvadoran Private Enterprise Association (ANEP), said that, regardless of who wins the elections, the winner should promote dialogue with private enterprises and respect business initiatives. He lamented that the FMLN has not briefed ANEP on its platform.

¶14. (U) On March 12, La Prensa Grafica published an interview with Rafael Barraza, former Director of the Central Bank, who said he regretted that neither party adequately addressed the current economic situation. He added that the private sector's confidence could play a major role in the outcome of the election; the FMLN has had open confrontation with the private sector, while the business world has sent signals that it has confidence in ARENA. He said that confidence would not only be a decisive factor in the election, but would also be a key to overcoming the current economic difficulties.

¶15. (U) Barraza said that Funes sounded like a candidate from the right. However, the leadership of the FMLN publicly sympathized with governments like those of Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro. In addition, he said the FMLN's platform was very general and not as complete as ARENA's. Therefore, ANEP was left with doubts about where the FMLN really stood on the issues.

TSE PERFORMS FINAL TECHNICAL TEST

¶16. (U) El Diario de Hoy reported that the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) tested the transmission of election results on March 8. About two hours into the test, the TSE detected a problem. La Prensa Grafica reported that the system crashed due the amount of information being transmitted, and one server had to be rebooted twice during the test. FMLN TSE Magistrate Eugenio Chicas said the system failed despite the TSE acquisition of a server with greater capacity than the ones used in the January elections. TSE President Walter Araujo (ARENA) said he was pleased with the test results.

EXPANDED OBSERVATION EFFORT

¶17. (U) On March 10, the TSE announced that nearly five thousand election observers will watch the presidential election process. TSE President Walter Araujo said there will be one observer for every two voting tables (JRVs) in the country. The Embassy plans an effort of approximately 70 observers, who will reach nearly 80 percent of Salvadoran municipalities.

INCREASED ELECTION DAY SECURITY PRESENCE

¶18. (U) Media reported that the National Civilian Police (PNC) and the Office of Migration announced the borders will remain open, but they will increase controls at border crossings into El Salvador in order to verify Central Americans' identification documents. The decision to bolster border security came after FMLN claims that ARENA was using citizens of neighboring countries to vote in its favor.

¶19. (U) In addition, two thousand Salvadoran military

officers will assist the nearly 18,000 police officers and 1,000 police trainees on Election Day. The military will be deployed to help guarantee peaceful and secure elections.

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